

## **Democracy and Polarization**

### **Foreword**

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#### **Background**

**T**he collection of essays in this special edition of the *Taiwan Journal of Democracy* reports on the first study completed by Research Associates of CREDO, a new Centre for Research on Democracy established at Stellenbosch University.

CREDO builds on a history stretching back to the early 1990s, which was initiated by a study examining the breakdowns of the apartheid and communist autocratic regimes and their respective transitions to democracy in South Africa and Poland. Until then, comparative research on democracy was almost exclusively regional and confined to either Latin America or Central and Eastern Europe. The comparison of South Africa and Poland broke this mould. By so doing, the study opened a new research perspective demonstrating that countries differing vastly in culture and the types of autocratic regime they had abandoned could be profitably compared.

The embryonic South Africa-Poland project had brought together political scientists, sociologists, historians, philosophers, and economists from both countries. The informal group of academics sharing a common interest in studying emerging democracies became known as the Transformation Research Initiative (TRI). Some years later, the enterprise reached a new level when colleagues from Germany, South Korea, Chile, and later Turkey, Taiwan, and Sweden were invited to come on board. From there on, the study of young democracies has been extended to all the major cultural regions of the world, with Germany and Sweden serving as well-established models of democratic quality. In 2015, the research program was institutionalized at Stellenbosch University as the Transformation Research Unit (TRU).

CREDO continues the tradition of its predecessors by applying the Most Different Cases-Most Similar Outcomes research method for comparative purposes, exemplified in this collection by the Kenya-Taiwan study. In contrast to its forerunners, however, CREDO focuses more strongly on South Africa and sub-Saharan Africa, which explains why African case studies predominate in what follows.

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## A Word on the Collection

The first three essays review some of the most salient aspects of the phenomenon of polarization, in general. They address respectively the morphology and dispersal of the term, the differences between polarization in domestic politics and in the international arena, and the impact of inequalities on polarization.

The opening essay is more extensive than the others because it offers a theoretical framework for the collection as a whole. Starting with tracing the origins and diffusion of polarization, the essay then maps the contours of the concept: its temporality, logic, and boundaries. It goes on to posit that the recent upsurge in political polarization studies has been a necessary response to the twenty-first century's political developments, but it cautions that a fuller specification of the construct is needed if we are to guard against future analytical pitfalls. Filling the gap, the essay considers, among other matters, when, where, and how the concept of political polarization can become a useful resource for comparative analyses in the face of growing confrontations and destabilizations.

The second essay shows the contrasting ways in which polarization is understood in international relations, as opposed to domestic politics. The essay starts by shedding light on the rigidity of the bipolar system versus the flexibility of the multipolar systems. The main part of the essay discusses the inhibiting role domestic polarization plays in conducting international diplomacy. The interrelation between the two entities is explored by taking into account several crucial aspects guiding diplomacy. The essay makes it clear that domestic polarization stands in the way of diplomacy at a time when democracy-autocracy bipolarity is on the rise and when major problems are global in nature and as such call for global solutions and cooperation.

The third contribution probes the relationship between inequalities and political polarization. The essay first explains why economists consider political polarization to have widely negative political and social effects, in addition to adverse economic outcomes. However, the essay is not about effects but causes. It examines factors thought to contribute to political polarization, with a particular interest in the role of inequalities in the distribution of income and wealth in high-income democracies. The essay offers both a comprehensive overview of the extent of economic inequalities at global and national levels and an interpretation of the presented evidence. The study confirms that inequality has been increasing in most high-income democracies it reviews. Of key interest are the dynamics that positively correlate rising inequality with political polarization.

The remaining four essays are case studies, which illustrate how polarization plays itself out in real existing political settings. Although in the main focused on Poland, the opening case-based study starts with more general reflections on polarization. To begin with, it considers at what point polarized opinions, which are deemed to be the very essence of liberal democracy, may

turn into an embittered confrontation with their potential to destroy it. The essay then introduces the concept of affective polarization, taking values as a major explanatory variable in its formation and social media as a means of its popularization. The analysis of polarization in Poland is conducted within a historical narrative contending that the phenomenon cannot be understood without taking account of history in a country defined intensely by religion and emerging from its antithesis, the communist system that has left its own legacy.

The second study compares the two highly contrasting cases of Taiwan and Kenya. The analyses show that both these young democracies experience polarization, albeit for different reasons. In Taiwan, cleavages are of a political-ideological nature; in Kenya, polarization is associated with ethnic identity. But in both cases, the divides significantly intensify polarization. The essay first examines how and why political polarization has developed so rapidly in the two countries and whether the trend lowers confidence in the respective electoral systems. The larger question is whether declining confidence in the election process in polarized polities leads to a democratic recession in new democracies. In this context, the essay considers the possibility of pursuing electoral reform as a means by which to possibly unify the respective divided societies in the two countries of interest.

The two remaining case studies are both focused on South Africa, a country that was rent apart by apartheid. Nelson Mandela, inspired by the imagery of a rainbow nation promoted by Bishop Desmond Tutu, tried to unite the country. His successor, Thabo Mbeki, undid much of this effort by proclaiming South Africa to be a country of two nations: the rich, of whom the majority were white, and the poor, of whom the majority were black. The deep inequality divide continues, except that now not all the rich are white, while the majority of blacks remain poor. In its official policy, the ruling African National Congress (ANC) returned to the notion of reconciliation in the post-Mbeki era. However, its conflicting factional politics, along with inordinately high levels of corruption accompanied by glaring failures in policy implementation, have served not to heal but to further deepen divisions across cleavages of the antagonistic groups.

The two essays on South Africa offer insights into why the purported unity has not been achieved. The first study investigates the inability of the ruling ANC government to create a just and equal society as a means by which to reduce polarization. The research examines the efficacy of judicial and legislative efforts to address the problem, arguing that while these efforts are necessary in cases of transgressions, social justice education might be the more effective solution to help narrow societal divisions. The second essay goes to the heart of the failure. It records the wide-spread corruption perpetuated by the administration of former president Jacob Zuma, exposing the extent to which the resulting poor governance has re-ignited the apartheid era's tensions by deepening the divide between the rich and the poor.

## **A Word of Appreciation**

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